



Press Release
September 17, 2020

Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, United States of America

On Sunday, September 13, a coalition of tribes including the Hopi Tribe, the Pueblo of Acoma, the Pueblo of Zia, and the Pueblo of Zuni repatriated and reinterred ancestors and associated funerary objects at the Mesa Verde National Park. The National Museum of Finland returned the human remains of 20 ancestors pursuant to a joint agreement with the sovereign tribes who claim cultural affiliation to the Mesa Verde Area. The U.S. Ambassador to Finland, Robert Pence, and representatives from both the Finnish government and the National Museum of Finland escorted the remains back to America. Finnair and American Airlines ensured their safe return.

- For over 50 years, requests for repatriation of the ancestral remains went unfulfilled. Ambassador Pence made it a priority to help return them to America.
- During President Niinistö's state visit to Washington in October 2019, President Trump, President Niinistö, and Ambassador Pence announced during a joint press conference an agreement to support the return of the Native American ancestral remains to the associated tribes for reburial at Mesa Verde National Park.
- This repatriation is the result of the unprecedented cooperation and agreements between the National Museum of Finland and the Associated Tribes of Mesa Verde.
- It is hoped that this repatriation will serve as an exemplar for future cooperation between museums and indigenous peoples.
- The U.S. Embassy extends its gratitude to the Government of Finland, the National Museum of Finland, Finnair, and American Airlines among others who were instrumental in returning these Native American ancestors back home. And most of all we want to thank the Associated Tribes of Mesa Verde, especially the Hopi, Acoma, Zia and Zuni.

Background: The Nordenskiöld collection originated from the Mesa Verde region in Colorado, United States, and includes over 600 finds from an area inhabited by Ancestral Puebloans, dating to the period between the 6th and the 12th centuries A.D. The collection included human remains of 20 persons and 28 funerary objects buried with those individuals. The objects were excavated and sent to Sweden in 1891 by Gustaf Erik Adolf Nordenskiöld (1868-1895), a geologist and botanist. Licentiate of Medicine Herman Fritiof Antell (1847-1893) purchased the collection shortly before his death in 1893.

The history of this incident played an important role in swaying public perception about the importance of protecting cultural heritage resources that ultimately led to the 1906 Antiquities Act and the establishment of Mesa Verde National Park (Nordenskiöld was initially detained for attempting to export these remains and artifacts out of the country but was eventually released and the collection shipped to Stockholm, Sweden as no U.S. laws at the time prohibited such action).

The collection came to Finland when Antell donated it to what became the National Museum of Finland. The donation included a collection of coins and medals, artworks as well as archaeological, ethnological, and cultural history related objects (the so-called Antell collection). According to Antell's will, the collections were to be donated "to the Finnish people and its representative, the Finnish Estates, to have and look after." Other collections besides the coins and medals were donated for use as the basis of the National Museum of Finland's collection or to be incorporated in it "... if they are deemed to be worthy of being combined with a public collection."

Following inquiries by the Hopi Tribe's Cultural Preservation Office, the National Museum of Finland took a re-inventory of the collection with efforts to identify the human remains and funerary objects in the collection. This inventory, which was completed in March of 2018, determined that the collection, containing 614 items, included remains of 20 individuals and 28 associated funerary objects.

In July of that same year, the U.S. Department of State sponsored an International Visitors Leadership Program to build relationships between Native American Tribes and European Museums. As part of this program, Ms. Heli Lahdentausta, an expert from the National Museum of Finland, met with representatives from the Hopi Tribe and visited other cultural institutions in New Mexico. Following that visit, the Republic of Finland notified the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki that it would consider an official request for repatriation of human remains and funerary objects. In a letter dated on July 5, 2018, and signed by Sampo Terho, Minister for European Affairs, Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Education and Culture informed the United States Embassy in Finland that a formal request from the U.S. authorities was required to initiate the process of repatriating the objects.

Thereafter, in 2018, at the annual meeting of the Mesa Verde Native American Tribal Consultation Committee, the committee determined by consensus that the Hopi, Acoma, Zia and Zuni tribes take the lead in the effort to see the ancestors returned home. The U.S. request

was made in fall 2018, followed by the unanimous passage of a resolution by the Hopi Tribal Council in July 2019 in support of the repatriation efforts. The All Pueblo Council of Governors, representing the 19 Pueblos in New Mexico and one in Texas, also passed a resolution in July of 2019 supporting the repatriation and the efforts of the Four Repatriating Tribes.

On September 25, 2019, the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs Unit for North America forwarded to the Ministry of Education and Culture for action a diplomatic note from the United States Embassy concerning the ancestral human remains and funeral objects of American indigenous peoples in the Mesa Verde collection and their possible repatriation.

The matter was discussed as President Niinistö met President Trump in Washington on October 2, 2019. The Presidents were joined by Robert Pence, United States Ambassador to Finland in announcing the repatriation of the ancestral remains and their funerary objects.

A contact person authorized by the Hopi tribe, via introduction from the U.S. Embassy, contacted the National Museum of Finland and reported that the Hopi tribe was working on behalf of the Mesa Verde Tribal Consultation Committee to ensure that the request for repatriating the human remains and funerary objects would be fulfilled.

The Mesa Verde National Park was established in the area in 1906 to protect the archaeological heritage of the Mesa Verde region. The National Park is administered, and its operation is coordinated in cooperation with the associated Tribes of Mesa Verde, which represents the indigenous peoples of the region - 26 tribes which have a connection with the Mesa Verde region (Taos, Picuris, Sandia, Isleta, Ohkay Owingeh, Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, Nambe, Tesuque, Jemez, Cochiti, Pojoaque, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Zia, Laguna, Acoma, and Zuni, Hopi, Ysleta del Sur, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute, Southern Ute, Northern Ute as well as Jicarilla).

The repatriation of the ancestral remains and funerary objects from Finland to Mesa Verde was handled by four tribes (Hopi, Acoma, Zia, and Zuni) with the consent and support of the Committee. The tribes in charge of the repatriation jointly agreed that the Hopi tribe would liaise with Finland in matters concerning the repatriation.

The National Museum of Finland negotiated with the tribes on the practical issues related to the return of the objects. Officials from the U.S. Department of State and the U. S. Embassy in Helsinki, as well as officials from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, participated in discussions between the National Museum of Finland and the tribes.

The objects were packaged in a manner that allowed for the uninterrupted transport from Helsinki to a burial site in Mesa Verde and their immediate reburial in compliance with the customs of the Mesa Verde tribes. The National Museum of Finland ensured that the objects were packaged in a manner approved by the representatives of the tribes in charge of the repatriation.

On Saturday, September 12, 2020, representatives from the Hopi, Acoma, Zia, and Zuni tribes received the ancestors in Durango, CO, after having been transported there with the assistance of the U.S. Department of State, and the following morning, after nearly 129 years abroad, the ancestors were finally reinterred to their home in Mesa Verde National Park.

This type of collaboration between museums and tribes enhances understanding of collections and contributes to the appreciation of Native American cultures.

For more information:

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